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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the family structures of 30 children (ages 7 to 18) with emotional/behavioral problems receiving treatment in a mental health agency. Traditional family structure was defined as a home in which both biological parents are present. Nontraditional family structures included: (1) single-parent families with one biological parent living in the home; (2) families with one biological parent and that parent's significant other; (3) step-parent families; and (4) guardianship families with neither of the child's biological parents living in the home. Analysis using a chi-square statistical procedure found that there was a higher frequency of children with emotional/behavioral living in nontraditional families than traditional families, although no specific type of nontraditional family structure was more frequent. (DB)

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Children with Emotional/Behavioral Problems and Their Family Structures

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the family structures of children with emotional/behavioral problems. The sample consisted of 30 children receiving treatment in a mental health agency. Using a Chi-Square, it was found that there was a higher frequency of children living in non-traditional families than traditional families. It was concluded that no specific type of non-traditional family structure was more frequent.

Children With Emotional/Behavioral Problems and Their Family Structures

Nearly two fifths of children in the United States do not live with both of their biological parents, and nearly one-twelfth live with a single mother who has never married the child's father (Remez, 1992). These statistics are increasing as the nuclear family becomes more extinct. As fewer children grow up in traditional families there has been concern about the impact of these family structures on children. More specifically, their health and well being.

A number of studies have found evidence that children of divorce have more problems than other single-parent children, who in turn have more problems than children in two-parent families (Ferri, 1976; Santrock, 1972). Among the indicators of child development that have been linked with divorce and/or single parenthood are lower measures of academic achievement (e.g. repeated grades of school and low marks or class standing) and increased levels of depression, stress, anxiety, aggression, and other emotional and behavioral problems (Dawson, 1991). children from divorced and single-parent families have also been found to be overrepresented among outpatient psychiatric patients and to be more likely than other children to have visited mental health professionals

(Dawson, 1991). There is a general agreement, however, that there exists a higher rate of delinquency and antisocial behavior among children of divorce than among children from intact households (Brady, Bray, & Zeeb, 1986). Some have noted a higher incidence of anxiety, neurotic symptoms, and habit formation problems, as well as mental retardation and medical problems among children of divorced parents (Brady et al, 1986). These results suggest that among children experiencing emotional and behavioral problems, those whose parents have divorced may be especially prone to developing certain types of developmental disorders while being relatively free from others (Brady et al, 1986). In a study done on the effect of remarriage on the child's adjustment, Kalter, (1977) found significantly more delinquent behavior among children of divorce living in a stepparent home.

In earlier research, it seems as though divorce has been associated with developmental problems in children. The present study examined a group of children who have emotional/behavioral problems and also looked at their family structure. This study investigated whether children with emotional/behavioral problems tend to live in traditional or non-traditional families. In addition, if they live in non-traditional families, what types? It was hypothesized that the

majority of children with emotional/behavioral problems came from non-traditional families. If non-traditional family structures are associated with negative effects on children then the next step would be to examine children who are receiving treatment in a mental health agency and see if family structures are non-traditional and if so, what types.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 30 children who have emotional/behavioral problems All members of the sample were receiving treatment services in a mental health agency. These children were chosen from two different treatment programs at the agency. All 30 were labeled SED (seriously emotionally disturbed) and 14 were SBH (severe behavior handicap). The sample ranged in age from 7 to 18 years. Twenty three members of the sample were males and 7 were females. All children have been in treatment for at least one year.

Procedure

In order to identify and define children who have emotional/behavior problems, the sample was selected from a mental health agency. The sample of 30 were chosen from a population of 45 SED children on the basis of being observed

for a total of 12 months. Each child's family structure was observed and recorded. Family structure included those children who were living with both biological parents. Non-traditional family structures included those children who were not living with both biological parents.

Each child's family structure was then identified as being one of five types. The five types are defined as follows: (1) traditional families-both biological parents living in the home, (2) single-parent families-one biological parent living in the home; (3) single parent and significant other families-one biological parent who is living with a significant other (4) step-parent families-one biological parent who has remarried living in the home; and (5) guardianship families neither parent living in the home.

Statistical analyses include the percentages of children living in traditional versus non-traditional family structures and the percentages of children living in each of the five family types. Chi-squares were then used to find frequencies of traditional and non-traditional family structures and the five types of families.

It is assumed that the sample is a homogeneous group since all children share similar traits such as living in same geographical area, race, and family income.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the family structures represented by the sample. According to the data, 17% of the children lived in traditional family structures while 83% lived in non-traditional family structures. All children living in non-tradtitional family structures had parents who were divorced-none were separated.

Insert Table 1 about here

Through Chi-square analysis a significant difference was found between traditional family structures and non-traditional family structures. Children with emotional/behavioral problems more frequently live in non-traditional family structures ($\underline{X}^2$=10.666, p. < .01).

Table 2 summarizes the family types represented by the sample. According to the data, 17% of the children live in traditional families, 23% live in single-parent families, 20% live in single-parent with significant other families, 20% in step-parent families, and 20% in guardianship families. When comparing the families of children with emotional/behavioral problems, there was not a significant difference among five types of family structures (X^2=.333,p > .05).

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The results of this study supported the original hypothesis: Children with emotional/behavioral problems live in non-traditional family structures. However, a particular type of non-traditional family structure was not found to be more significant. In earlier research (Remez, 1992), it was found that nearly two fifths of children in the United States do not live with both of their biological parents. It is not known what percentage of these children have emotional/behavioral problems. The present study found 83% of the children in the sample not living with both biological parents. This estimate is greater than the national average which indicated that the majority of children who do not live with both biological parents have emotional/behavioral problems.

There are some limitations that should be addressed. The sample was selected from one agency and therefore the generalizability of the findings may be limited. The sample was small and not randomly chosen thus representation of the overall population of children with emotional/behavioral problems is reduced. In addition, it was unknown whether the

emotional/behavioral problems started before or after the parents were divorced. Causal comparisons cannot be made in this type of research. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the type of family structure causes children to have emotional/behavioral problems.

The results indicated that the majority of children with emotional/behavioral problems live in non-traditional family structures. This information can be applied and administered in several ways: To design parenting groups, intervention strategies, prevention programs and to refine treatment approaches. In addition, this information can be useful when considering the development of theory and the education of professionals.

It is recommended that future studies be done comparing the family structures of "well -adjusted" children. Also, other contributing factors such as socioeconomic status, could be investigated. Finally, this study could be replicated using a better representative sample.

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Table 1

Representation of Family Structures

Structure	Number of Children	%
Traditional family structure	5	17
Non-traditional family structure	25	83

Table 2

Representation of Family Types

Type	Number of Children	%
Traditional family	5	17
Single-parent family	7	23
Single-parent with significant other family	6	20
Step-parent family	6	20
Guardianship family	6	20